DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 057 482 EA 003 893

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TITLE Decentralization as a Management Tool.
PUB DATE 5 Aug 71
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at American Management Association Annual Conference and Exposition (7th, New York City, August 3-5, 1971)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Organization; Administrative Policy; Administrator Qualifications; Conflict Resolution; *Decentralization; *Leadership Styles; Principals; *School Districts; *Superintendents

ABSTRACT

This speech argues that effective management of schools requires the decentralization of management functions from the superintendent level to that of the building principal. The speaker notes that, for an educational administrator, survival is related to the ability to deal with conflict. According to the author, principals must become the major conflict managers, deal with conflict at its lowest level, and produce change that is of maximum benefit to those affected by that change. (JF)

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DECENTRALIZATION AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL *

Donald Thomas

The basic position of this paper is that effective management of schools requires the decentralization of management functions. It is no longer possible to manage the educational enterprise from the superintendent's office. I doubt that such was ever possible. Today management can be most effective when it has the widest possible support of teachers, parents, and students. Such support can best be obtained through decentralization. Without widespread support management is neutralized and managers are castrated. Decentralization of the management functions at best prevents both; at worst, eases the pain.

I would like to discuss a concept management as a style of leadership. Next I would like to talk about the levels of management. My major concentration will be on the next section: a discussion of who has foremost responsibility for the management of schools. The paper will end with a presentation of management strategies in a decentralized system.

A Concept of Management.

Management is no longer a dirty word. In a society plagued with conflicts, with vested interest groups, with ambivelence, with problems that seem impossible to solve, management has gained a new respectibility. Managers are no longer seen as the "keepers of the status quo." Effective managers move ahead while managing the conflicts around them. It's almost like scoring touchdowns with one play --the quarterback sneak.

Management is a process of need satisfaction. As needs are satisfied progress is made. Management, for the purpose of this paper, may be defined as "the process

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*Presented to the 7th Annual Conference and Exposition of the American Management Association, August 3-5, 1971 in New York City.

of producing change which is accompanied by need satisfaction for those affected by the change."

The management process does not differ from the leadership process. There is no conflict between the words "leader" and "manager." Manager is simply a more comprehensive idea and management is broader than leadership. We may say, in a different way, that inherent in the management function is a style of leadership that brings satisfaction to those affected by the change process. The manager identifies needs and produces change by catering to the needs. As change is produced support for the change is established because of need satisfaction. It is this type of leadership style that is needed and is most appropriate in the educational setting.

Management can also be described as a process of cooperative confrontation, of coming up with agreements that will control and direct conflict. It is similar to what the French define as love, "cooperative egotism." Each, person must receive some need satisfaction from the management process and no win or lose attitude should prevail.

This concept of management can also be seen as a negotiations process. Every effective school leader should understand John Kennedy when he said:

> "Let us begin anew, remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, that sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate."

Management is the process of moving ahead through constant negotiations. It is the ability to pursuade without using power. It is achievement through shared participation. It is the process which uses less authority and more human relations,

less written material and more oral experiences, less unilateral action and more consensus.

School leaders should view the management process as negotiations view the negotiations process -- the aim to obtain mutually beneficial change by agreement. If the struggle needs are satisfied, acceptable goals are established, and agreements are reached. Participatory struggling leads to a better understanding of each others problems and needs.

Management in this sense has with it all of the problems and satisfactions allied to the negotiations process. To annihilate an opponent may be a victory, but the next day the schools may be empty. To innovate boldly may be ego-satisfying, but teachers may reduce the innovation to memos. On the other hand effective management may lead to superordinate goals which benefit all participants. Hopefully this will be the result most often obtained.

The Levels of Management.

The responsibility to manage the educational system is inherent in each management position -- principal, superintendent, director, assistant superintendent or supervisior. Each level of management must assist to manage the enterprise and create need-satisfying changes. The organization continues as a self-renewing structure to the extent that management is effective and supportive of continuous change.

The management functions' should be exercised at the level at which the problem or change -- desire exists. No avoidance opportunity should exist in the management of schools. Each administrative officer must develop the skills and the appetite for management. Each must have a desire to act when confronted

with change-desire situations. This is the essence of decentralized management-action at the lowest level possible to solve the problem.

Management continues to a higher level when agreements cannot be obtained or when additional resources are needed to arrive at agreements. This escalation will be kept at a minimum if decentralization is comprehensive in the school system. This means decentralization of budgets, decentralization of personnel selection, decentralization of curriculum development, decentralization of contract implementation, decentralization of policy formation, and decentralization of evaluation. Decentralization of management is possible only when there is dencentralization of management resources. Levels of management are made possible by decentralization of management resources without dencentralization management resides in the office of the superintendent.

Responsibility for Management.

Although it has already been stated that management exists at all levels, it must now be said that in education the chief management position is the principalship. The principal is the day-to-day manager. He is the one on the firing line, the battle-field commander. He is the one who daily sits at the negotiations table with teachers, parents, and students. The superintendent is most effective when the principals are managing well. May I suggest why this is so.

1. Parents, teachers and students develop strong loyalties to individual building and building principals. Such loyalties are important to the superintendent and encouraged by him. Strong principals with wide-spread support are the most vital asset that a superintendent can have. The principal thus is central to decision-making, to the resolution of

problems, and to effective school-community relations. Without the principal's cooperation, parents will not be supportive, teachers will not assist, and students can become hostile.

2. Problems occur at the building level and are usually resolved there. The principal must insist that problems brought to the attention of the superintendent be referred back to the building. It is there that the problems must be solved. The authority of the principal should not be undermined at any time. The solution of problems at the building level strengthens the position of the principal. Each problem solved by the building principal saves the superintendent's time, so that he can carry out his own duties more effectively.

3. It is the individual buildings that provide direct services to parents, teachers, and students. In providing services principals enhance their power base and influence. Better salaries, federal aid, and new programs all assist the principal in providing broader and more intensive services. In doing so he becomes a more important educational leader.

4. The principal usually knows more about his building than anyone else. The superintendent is at the mercy of the building principal when it comes to answering questions, developing new programs, and making long range plans. The building principal supplies the necessary detailed information so vitally needed in these areas, and without this knowledge plans are of little value. Principals usually have the most up-to-date information needed by the superintendent.

5. Teachers generally trust principals more than they do central administrators.

Because they work closely with principals, teachers generally "like" them, but feel that central administrators are impersonal, sometimes even hostile. As Laski once said, "People who work together, think alike." In addition, they tend to engage in solving common problems, they have common social experiences; and, therefore, tend to appreciate each other.

6. Boards of Education usually have strong support for individual principals. Parents have commented to them about the principal or their children have attended the principal's school. The board members have a closer attachment to the building where their children attend. Their evaluation of the system is to a great extent based on how their children are doing in a particular building, or how they are impressed by the work of a particular building principal. A good building principal enhances the image of the superintendent; a poor one detracts from him.

7. Good principals cannot be intimidated in any way. Effective principals take on total responsibility for the operation of their buildings. They are not intimidated by problems, by vested interest, or intense pressures. They are capable of making decisions and justifying them. They seek out information from the Central Office, or anywhere else; but do not ask others to make their decisions for them. Good principals demand all the services they are properly entitled to and will not accept "no" for an answer, when "yes" is the only reasonable answer that should be given.

No one is more important to the success of the school system than the principal. The issues, the problems, the challenges have created demands for a manager-principal; one who can influence, lead, confront, and manage

The conflicts around him. This he can do if the resources of the system are decentralized. It is the only way he can be held accountable for what happens in his school.

Strategies for Management.

Management at any level requires certain resources -- money, people, alternatives, change-desires. It also requires a bank of strategies. Some strategies we may wish to examine are these:

1. Citizens advisories
2. Confrontation sessions
3. Sensitivity training
4. Process involvement
5. Educational Pluralism
6. Volunteerism
7. Cooperative Studies
8. Failure

Stephen K. Bailey of the Policy Institute, Syracuse University Research Corporation says that a successful conflict manager/educational administrator;

. knows what's going on, what's bugging the young, the oppressed, the sensitive. He should be able to recognize legitimate grievances, and respond to new hungers.

. is realistic about himself. Knowing his own and his office's strengths and weaknesses will lead to delegate authority, to involve third parties in disputes, to withdraw when necessary.

. substitutes collective judgment for personal discretion whenever

possible. This allows him to create buffers in order to buy time, to absorb heat, to promote collective wisdom.

. has a strategy to fall back on when conflict becomes unreasonable. He estimates his own and his enemy's strength. He decides what to do. He marshals his resources. He persuades his leaders of the value of his plan. He acts.

. knows that at certain times in life all will seem lost, and that the best course is to ride out the storm. Few men are supermen.

Bailey believes that direct experience of conflict situations will foster these traits most effectively. In order of importance he lists the traditional preparatory rites for an educational administrator/conflict manager: apprenticeship and direct responsibility (experience), reading novels and plays (vicarious experience), case studies and sensitivity training, and formal theory.

Conclusion.

Survival for educational administrators is related to his ability to deal with conflict. Survival is possible if the management of schools is decentralized and if principals become the major conflict managers, dealing with conflict at its lowest level and producing change of maximum benefit to those affected by the change.

Decisions are judgments. They are choices from among many alternatives. At best the choice is between what may be right and what may be wrong. Rarely is the choice between right and wrong. In most cases right and wrong is not involved. Solutions to problems must satisfy the needs of the participants, must reduce the need for further conflict. The educational

process cannot destroy itself by constant conflict, nor can it improve because there is a lack of conflict.

Finally, people are no longer willing to sit passively and let the superintendent think and decide for them. This was the old way of playing the game and there were too many losers. Decentralized management protects the system from a win-lose situation. It provides us with a process to develop need satisfaction and cooperative goals. It may be our only way to survive.

For those of you who are interested in reading further in this area, may I suggest these books:

The Effective Executive by Peter Drucker

The Art of Negotiating by Gerard Nierenberg

Walk, Run, or Retreat by Neil Sullivan

Leadership Skills for Executive Action by Douglas C. Basil